

MISSION

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Greenpeace calls attention to toxic dumping in the nation's waterways

by Mary Nolan

ST. LOUIS — "A man that drunk Mississippi water could grow corn in his stomach if he wanted to," Mark Twain wrote in "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn."

John Liebman has taken water samples up and down the Mississippi, and he's found little resemblance to the once robust, fertile frontier river so loved by Mark Twain.

Just below the Gateway Arch, Liebman stands barefoot on the river bank. With a coffee cup in one hand and a thin cigar in the other, he tosses out the names of heavy metals, agricultural chemicals and toxic wastes that he's found concentrated in the river.

"There are dead zones in the river where nothing can live," he says, shaking his head in disgust.

Liebman is part of an entourage of scientists and environmental activists scouring the Mississippi aboard a floating water-testing laboratory.

Greenpeace, known worldwide for its campaigns to save whales, to stop nuclear testing and to preserve the Antarctic, has taken up the cause of toxic-free water in North America.

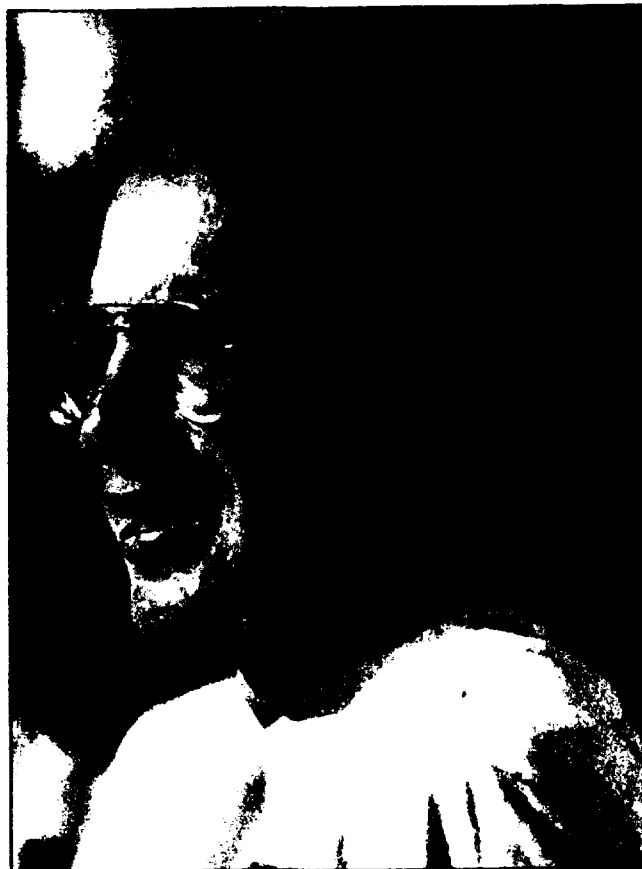
Along with its reputation for sensational protests, Greenpeace has brought along the *Beluga*, a 78-foot converted firefighting vessel from Hamburg, West Germany.

The boat's rainbow stripes and hand-painted banners belie its sophistication and the seriousness of its mission. Every two minutes, the *Beluga* draws in river water and monitors the temperature, conductivity and oxygen dissolved in the river. Along with gauging the health of the river, the water sampling helps scientists on board to locate underground drainage pipes where they take direct samples of effluent being pumped into the river.

The *Beluga* has already traveled down the St. Lawrence River to Lake Ontario, Lake Erie, Lake Huron, Lake Superior and Lake Michigan, pinpointing the major sources of pollution along the way.

Greenpeace activists say the Great Lakes' water samples were not surprising. A 1985 report by the U.S. National Research Council and the Royal Society of Canada contained two ominous warnings: first, that people in the Great Lakes basin are accumulating "appreciably more" toxic chemicals in their bodies than any other North Americans; and second, that contamination of the Great Lakes is becoming so bad that the lakes may eventually be lost as a source of drinking water.

Despite water quality agreements signed by the U.S. and Canada in 1978 and again in 1987, Greenpeace lab tests identified hundreds of toxic chemicals in the Great Lakes,



Bradley Angel served as spokesman for the Greenpeace group at the Bissell Point protest.

which form the largest surface supply of fresh water on the planet.

After completing a tour of the Great Lakes, the *Beluga* began the second leg of the 1988 Greenpeace North American Inland Waters Expedition. Undeterred by record low water levels, the boat set sail down the Mississippi from Minneapolis on Aug. 24.

Like the Great Lakes, the Mississippi is a vital ecosystem. As the river flows nearly 2,500 miles from northern Minnesota's Lake Itasca south to the Gulf of Mexico, it collects and carries more fresh water than any river on the continent. To those who have sampled the river, "fresh water" is a misnomer. The rainfall, rivers, streams that run off 40 percent of the continental United States eventually merge with the river. The contaminants are so widespread that environmental writer Michael Brown calls the Mississippi the "national swill."

In a laboratory wedged in the bow of the

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Mississippi mission

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Beluga, Tora Lejon, a Swedish chemist, holds up a glass vial filled with water he collected from the headwaters of the Mississippi. The water is clear except for a few solid particles that have drifted to the bottom.

In contrast, Greenpeace scientists have collected water in the St. Louis area so dense with chemicals that the samples are thick and bright yellow.

Before their six-month North American tour, Greenpeace advance workers took samples from the Mississippi to use as a point of comparison — just in case waste facilities or companies turned down or turned off their discharge while Beluga is in the area.

"En route to the laboratory, one sample exploded," Liebman said.

Currently, only 30 of the 700 contaminants found in drinking water are regulated under the Federal Safe Drinking Water Act. However, in 1986 Congress re-authorized the act and directed that, by 1991, the Environmental Protection Agency must set new maximum contaminant levels for currently regulated substances and set testing requirements for 87 additional substances.

"Federal guidelines have to be revised. We need to change the whole idea that toxic discharge is acceptable," Liebman says.

Greenpeace chemists have focused on easily identified points of pollution, like the drainage pipes of waste treatment facilities. But those working on the clean water campaign are equally alarmed by the more diffuse run-off from agricultural products.

"Because of the drought, we're finding excessive use of pesticides and herbicides," Liebman says. "You can see the impact vividly down in the Gulf of Mexico, where the algae bloom has spread over 2½ acres, choking off all sea life."

The phosphate in fertilizers, Liebman explains, promotes excessive growth of algae, which can eventually rob the water of oxygen needed to support other forms of life.

While this is the Beluga's first run outside of Europe, Greenpeace has its roots in North America. The environmental organization came to life more than 17 years ago in British Columbia, Canada, through the efforts of a small group of people who opposed nuclear testing on Amchitka Island in Alaska. The group marked its first victory when the island was designated a bird sanctuary. Today, long with 27 offices in the United States, Greenpeace is active in New Zealand, Australia, the United Kingdom, Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Spain, Italy, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Sweden, West Germany,

"We are not an outside group coming in and making trouble," insists Bradley Angel, a Greenpeace organizer from San Francisco. "We have 60,000 members in Illinois and Missouri."

Greenpeace activists think of themselves as "bearing witness" — a concept borrowed from the Quakers. "If you are aware of an injustice, you must bear responsibility for the problem," said Annie Leonard, a Greenpeace researcher who flew in from Washington, D.C., to meet up with the Beluga tour.

"We are trying to obstruct wrongs against the environment without violence or harm," Leonard said, standing in the shadow of a garbage truck parked outside a St. Louis waste incinerator. Shielding her eyes from the midmorning sun, Leonard points to the white, noxious-smelling smoke belching from the plant's smokestack.

"Air pollutants do not adhere to city, state or national boundaries," she says. "The pollution travels thousands of miles and the toxic chemicals fall indiscriminately. It ends up in the drinking supplies of other cities and on the tomato plants in someone's garden."

The waste incinerator plant, located along the Mississippi River, has been targeted for what Greenpeace activists call "direct action."

Dressed in white hard hats and coveralls like plant employees, several Greenpeace activists drive past plant guards without being stopped.

Outside the plant, a busload of Greenpeace activists chant and wave posters while Alexis Myers, 23, of Laguna Hills, Calif., Brett Radford, 21, of Chicago, and Sun Min Lee, 19, of Glendale, Calif., prepare to scale the 225-foot smokestack of the St. Louis Metropolitan Sewer District's Bissell Point treatment plant. The diversion gives the climbers a chance to begin their ascent using safety lines and climbing equipment.

"It's quite possible they'll be arrested. The goal is to stay up there as long as possible," says Angel, who is coordinating the protest against the plant's burning of industrial waste.

"Secondary treatment (burning) is good for cleaning up human waste, but it is not proper for industrial waste. Instead of going into the river, the toxic wastes will be going into the air. Eventually, it falls into water systems, but over a wider area."

"No matter how good the incinerator, it's playing with a wild card," he says.

To guard against toxic poisoning, the climbers wear respirators. "This is anything but a media event," Angel says, even as another television crew pulls into the sludge-covered lot. When the climbers reach the top of

says.

As the trio slowly make their way up the stack, police and firefighters assemble alongside plant officials.

"If your banner is unfurled and blocks the emissions, we will have to evacuate the plant," a St. Louis police sergeant says, speaking through a wire fence that separates Greenpeace activists from the manicured grounds of the plant itself. He gives Greenpeace organizers assurances that the police won't interfere with the climbers as long as they don't damage the property or hurt anyone. As a precaution, firefighters erect a safety net around the base of the smokestack.

From the ground, Greenpeace organizers communicate with the climbers via two-way radios: "You guys are going to have to climb down on the outside of the cage. Get the banner down first and tie down the ends or they'll be out of reach."

The wind picks up, turning the banner into a twisted streamer.

Even when planned with military precision, Greenpeace confrontations aren't without glitches. Two days earlier, in Sauget, Ill., a river city once known as the village of Monsanto, Greenpeace activists erected a makeshift dam to block the discharge pipe at the American Bottoms sewage treatment plant. The plant has been cited for 1984 violations of its operating permit since May 1986. But neither a lawsuit filed by the EPA nor Greenpeace's protest has changed its dumping practices.

Unlike their burst dare in Sauget, some of Greenpeace's protests along the Mississippi have stuck like a leech. Near the Quad Cities, activists plugged a Monsanto discharge pipe with reinforced steel and two tons of concrete.

"There was the possibility of the discharge backing up and damaging the facility, but we always warn them in advance that we are taking action," says Leonard.

"We are usually careful not to cause damage to the environment, property or human life. We are not really into blowing things up," she said alluding to the 1985 bombing of the Greenpeace flagship, the Rainbow Warrior. Two French secret agents were convicted of the bombing, which left a Greenpeace photographer dead.

Greenpeace activists say they've

already been targets of violence and harassment during their Mississippi expedition. In Muscatine, Iowa, the windows of one of their vans were smashed by local police. In St. Louis, Greenpeace organizers believe they were under surveillance by security guards hired by a chemical manufacturer.

From St. Louis, the Beluga will travel to Calvert City, Ky., up the River onto the Tennessee River, then by boat and land caravan of buses and vans will eventually end up in the "chemical corridor" that stretches from Baton Rouge to New Orleans.

"Due to the concentration of industry in St. Louis, Greenpeace is spending more time here than anywhere else on the river," Angel says.

Raw sewage flows into the Mississippi from 28 outlets along the St. Louis riverfront. There are 15 outlets that release treated effluent and 65 industrial discharge pipes.

Chemicals, including toxic substances, can be discharged in unlimited amounts as long as they are diluted to meet concentration limits, Liebman says. An industrial plant or treatment plant can just pull water from the river to lower the concentration of pollutants.

Greenpeace maintains that the standard "dilution-is-the-solution" approach is inadequate in protecting public health and the environment from heavy metals and synthetic chemicals. Existing laws permit the daily discharge of millions of pounds of industrial toxic chemicals into the water, soil and air.

According to a report released last week by Greenpeace, St. Louis ranks New Orleans for more toxic releases above the national average. The report, compiled by Public Data Access Inc. of New York, analyzed toxic readings alongside mortality rates.

Officials of manufacturing companies and waste treatment facilities won't comment on the safety of chemicals and manufacturing products released into the river. Terry Briggs, a spokesman for the St. Louis Metropolitan Waste Department, defends the release of toxic chemicals: "It's legal."

It's not legal to drape a smokestack with protest banners, especially one that reads P-O-I-S-O-N in big block letters. The Greenpeace climbers were arrested once they climbed down



gfield, Illinois

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